ISHMAEL

Drawings by Charles Livingston Bull

By WALTER A. DYER

IT had rained all day, and the Long Island prairie lay dismal and water-soaked. Nearly all the yellow leaves had been washed or blown from the double row of wind-wracked maples; here and there a scrubby oak, tenacious of its red-brown leaves, stood solemn and dripping. Save for these and for an occasional empty wagon road and a few glacial dunes, the lonely heath stretched flat and unbroken from Hempstead to Westbury. The setting sun had rent a gap in the western clouds, and its golden beams were reflected from millions of raindrops on coarse prairie grass and weeds, and from the glistening roofs of a few farm buildings toward the south.

A flock of crows flew cawing overhead on the way to their North Shore home. In a tall sycamore near Potter's farmhouse a regiment of starlings held a noisy, whistling council. The vesper of the song sparrow was heard in the land, and somewhere to the east a screech owl had begun his broken, querulous call. These would have been evident to the casual observer; but among the weeds and grasses there also dwelt a populous community, hidden from mortal eyes, living their adventurous little lives in accordance with the laws of the wild.

As the sun slowly sank beneath its band of clouds a stealthy form crept out from beneath a tuft of grass beside a little swamp. It was a small creature, about the size of a gray squirrel, with a long, lithe body, dark brown, nearly black, with a spot of white on the chin. One might have taken it for a weasel, but for its larger body, thicker tail, and catlike head. It was Putorius the mink.

He sat for a moment, his sharp eyes seeming to penetrate the rank ground vegetation, and then he vanished swiftly from sight, as though the earth had swallowed him: only to reappear as suddenly a few rods away.

By swift, baffling stages he made his way to the road, and then began to run rapidly toward the town, his body bending like a hoop, and his short legs propelling him easily at incredible speed. Occasionally he stopped, sniffed the air, and then hurried on.

He passed two or three farmhouses, stopping for only a whiff or two, and came at length to Thomas Lange's chicken house. Stealthily he crept round it, sniffing the wire netting. The warm smell intoxicated him, and his movements were hasty and excited.

Suddenly a new and terrible scent caused him to stop and turn his head. There by the side of the barn stood the monstrous bulk of a huge black dog, watching him intently in the gathering dusk. For a moment they stood regarding each other, the dog boldly, the mink furtively, and then, as the former took a step forward, there was a slight scurry, and Putorius completely and instantaneously disappeared.

IN the Atwaters' living room next morning a frightful row suddenly broke loose. Sandy, the brown Irish terrier, leaped upon the couch by the window, barking furiously.

"What in the world is the matter?" demanded Mr. Atwater, hastening into the room. He glanced out the window and saw a big black dog busy with a bone that Sandy or one of his acquaintances had abandoned on the front lawn.

"Be quiet, Sandy," commanded Atwater. "It's only Ishmael. Haven't you got used to him yet?"

"Poor Ishmael!" said Mrs. Atwater, stepping to the window. "I wish someone would adopt him. I suppose he isn't any particular kind of dog; but he's gentle and affectionate. I hate to chase him out of the yard all the time; but if I pat him or speak to him he wants to hang around, and we simply can't have him here. Besides, it makes Sandy furiously jealous."

They stood watching Ishmael. He was indeed no particular kind of dog. He had the long, black hair of a Newfoundland, while his noble head and a look about the face suggested a Great Dane. His big, thick tail, too, was a Dane's, except that it was hairy and set on all wrong. Atwater had christened him Ishmael because he knew no master and every man's hand was against him.

Sandy started up his indignant and vociferous protest again, and because it was the peaceful Sabbath, Atwater was forced to go out and shoo Ishmael off.

When Robert Sammis came with the Sunday paper Atwater said, "Your friend Ishmael has been around here again."

"Has he?" asked Robert, with interest.

"Why don't you take him home and have him for your dog?" asked Atwater. "If he had a home and plenty to eat, he wouldn't roam about so, and he'd make a good dog for you."

"I wish I could," replied Robert wistfully; "but father won't let me. He says dogs kill chickens, and he doesn't like them, anyway. Besides, he says if he had any dog at all, it wouldn't be a stray mutt."

Meantime Ishmael, hungry both for food and for human love, made his way by a devious route back to the east of the town, where the garbage heaps were more abundant. At Bemis's on Front-st. he went in to pass the time of day with Bob, a big bull terrier who spent his life at the end of a chain and was reputed to be dangerous. Bob had a master of limited intelligence and sympathies, and Ishmael had none; so they enjoyed stolen moments of the companionship of misery. In return for an occasional bone or other morsel Ishmael was able to give Bob a bit of news of the great world.

When Ishmael again came out upon the street his attention was attracted by the yapping of a dirty fox terrier sitting beside his master on the seat of a wagon. Ishmael stood and wagged his tail, and barked deeply once or twice in reply. The little dog's master threw something at Ishmael, and then laughed at the big dog's hurt look as he hurried off, glancing apprehensively over his shoulder, with his tail drooping crookedly.

Dawson's collie threw him the usual insults from behind his fence, and a big old hound passed him in silence.

Ishmael sighed heavily as he stood at length before the Collingworth Kennels and watched the antics and listened to the bickerings of the puppies that were to become pampered and beribboned pets of fashion,—dogs of the upper classes, whose lot was so easy and whose dinner tins were always so full. Ishmael shook his head perplexedly and passed on.

DEATH, silent and mysterious, stalked o' nights through the poultry yards of Hempstead. On the morning of October 24 Thomas Lange found seven of his best pullets dead in their house and yard. He repaired his walls and fences, and placed a trap before the door. The next morning it was Martin Sammis to whose Rhode Island Reds had come the terror by night. Within two weeks no less than ten poultry houses, great and small, had been visited, and chickens killed there or in the open.

At first it was thought to be the work of a skunk; but no skunk entered the waiting traps, nor did any leave behind him the telltale scent. Rats it might have been; but rats do not make a circuit of a village, visiting now this farm and now that. Besides, the form of death administered was unusual. Each fowl was neatly and effectively nipped in the throat and abandoned, apparently after the murderer had taken his draft of warm blood.

The Hempstead papers that second week published accounts of the mystery, and one ingenious contributor decided that the work must have been done by some fiendishly clever dog, which killed for the joy of killing.

Thereafter two or three men sat up with guns; but to no avail. Those who shot at cats or dogs aimed widely in the dark, and death attacked the roosts of their neighbors. Then came the evening when Jack Walsh, returning late, hurled a futile missile at a strange, small animal that streaked across the road, and found four of his best Wyandottes garroted back of his house. That gave rise to the weasel theory which the papers exploited; but most of the farmers still suspected the mysterious and murderous dog.

"I believe it's that black tramp dog," said Martin Sammis. "If this thing don't stop pretty soon, I'll shoot him anyhow."

ON a crisp November night Putorius the mink stole out from his grassy retreat on the brown Hempstead plains and made his swift, silent way toward the scattered farms to the northeast of the town. A frightened field mouse scurried for cover; but Putorius did not stop. Apparently he had a definite goal in mind. He did not turn in at Lange's place, nor did he take notice of a black form that rose quietly from its comfortless bed by the fence and took up his trail.

Putorius was immediately lost to sight; but hunger stimulated in black Ishmael the latent hunting instinct inherited from some distant ancestor, and with his nose to the ground he padded steadily along. Close to the fence in front of Henderson's orchard the trail took him, through the tall grass at the edge of Al Barkley's meadow—always where there was cover, always out of the bright moonlight. All was silent save the distant rumble of a train and the spasmodic baying of poor old Bob Bemis. The ancient village was wrapped in peace; but death awaited some luckless brood.

In front of the Sammis place Ishmael hesitated; then he caught the scent again and followed the trail along the fence toward the buildings back of the house. He moved quietly now—very quietly for such a clumsy brute. He stopped and lifted his big head. A slight scratching sound caught his ear; but he could see nothing, so he dropped his nose again to the ground, keeping his ears cocked the while.

Suddenly a great clamor arose among the chickens,—squawks of terror, and squeaks of death. Ishmael dashed forward and reached the chicken house just in time to see a sleek, catlike little head, with bright, beady eyes, thrust out from beneath the door of the scratching yard, and then hastily withdrawn. Ishmael stood watching the place, and

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"There stood the monstrous dog watching him intently."